everything could have been different

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Three alternate endings to the series.

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Introduction
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Part I

Ryuko's body first begins to fail two weeks after the world had been saved, and she acts like it's just a cold getting her down. She feigns a cough, pretends she can't breathe through her nose anymore, and laughs an awkward laugh as the days pass by and they ask with hard, long faces why she's not getting any better.

Maybe, they say, with big, deep frowns, this cold isn't really a cold, and you should get yourself looked at.

And she falters a little before she answers, her heart fluttering rapidly against him as she considers revealing everything, but in the end she doesn't, and she smiles a crooked smile instead, shrugging her shoulders, wondering aloud if maybe it's actually the flu.

Nothing to worry about, she concludes, and it's so convincing that even he can almost believe it.

Four weeks after the world had been saved, she's not anywhere near recovered, and neither is he. When the night comes and it gets at its worst, she sleeps together with him, whispering words that bring them closer, and her breathing comes a little easier. For a moment, she can close her eyes and sleep, and he can imagine that they can stay forever like this, without ever worrying about tomorrow.

But she always wakes before the sun even peeks through the murky windows. Not even the birds fill the air with their endless twittering, and it is behind only the gentle *rumble* of her family's snores that she collapses into him, cursing and crying, insisting that they're *different* and they shouldn't have to suffer this way.

He cannot say anything to comfort her. He cannot even bring himself to tell her not to cry. His own body is hardly keeping itself together, and his tears fall into hers as he holds her close in a way that only he can. He may not be able to save her, he knows, but he can make sure that she is never alone again.

Five weeks, and she can no longer pretend that it's a cold, or a flu, or even pneumonia. Her family looks at her with knowing eyes, and she looks at herself the same way whenever she steals a glance at a mirror, as though she can see beneath her skin, beyond this false form that doesn't betray who-or *what* -she really is.

When she's put in the finest hospital Japan can offer, she refuses to wear the frumpy hospital gowns that are required of their patients, and it is only the grand influence of Satsuki Kiryuin that allows her to get away with it. She laughs as they hook her up to machines and stick tube after tube in her to help her breathe, because she shouldn't be in a hospital, she says, the words coming out muffled, since it's hard to speak with plastic stuffed in her throat and a thick mask over her face. She should be lying flat on a table in some lab, she tells them, waiting to be dissected, surrounded by scientists with white coats and white gloves and huge goggles that leave red rims around your eyes when you wear them for too long.

No one laughs at her jokes. They sit beside her bed very solemn, very quiet, because to see the strong, powerful Ryuko Matoi so weak is too difficult. So they don't look, and hardly answer, and it is only when they feel certain that Ryuko is asleep that Mako cries ravaged cries, whispering that it's not fair, that she was *different*, that she was the first one who could ever be called a friend, and it is only then that he feels Ryuko's tears fall onto him.

Outside the room, he hears their arguments. Surely, her sister says, you can find a way to save her. There *has* to be some way, any way, for her long lost sibling is *not* like her mother, and is not like the weapon she had once used as her own, and is not like the girl who had never felt true love in her entire life, so monstrous was she, and so monstrous was her creator, her mother who was no mother at all.

But the scientists shake their heads, and the doctors shake their heads with them. What was keeping her alive is now dying, they say, and we can't fix it, or help her, and so it is impossible, and she is not going to make it, and there is nothing we can do.

And her sister does not speak the words, but he remembers the warmth of her touch when she had caught them after they had won, and remembers the look in her eye, and the gentleness of her smile when she thought that she was never going to lose Ryuko again, and he sees it in her face when she comes into the room, her cheeks stained, and dark, purple shadows smudged where they should not be, not on a face like hers, not on the great, powerful Satsuki Kiryuin.

He says to her that it is not her fault. He knows she hears, but she does not answer, looking towards the heart rate monitor with glittering eyes, and towards her sister who can no longer stay awake, and she thanks him, silently, with a deep bow.

Late in the night, Ryuko cracks open tired eyes, and he hears her shudder, for to be awake is to accept the pain, and know the inevitable. He blinks open his own eyes, looking at her the best he can.

She says, "We're not gonna make it past tonight, are we?" And she can scarcely even say it, and her heart pushes on a little quicker as she tries.

He doesn't say anything. She already knows the answer.

She does not cry. Perhaps it is the thought that is more terrifying than the actuality.

She asks, "Can we synchronize, just one last time?"

The glove still covers her hand. He still feels her blood coursing through him, no matter how much his body is failing, and how much he's falling apart all across these sheets, and all across her.

He says *yes* .

It is an amazing feeling, the power that rushes through them. For a brief, blissful moment, they are not dying, but at their very strongest, bursting with energy and pushing forward without any regrets. They are not two people any longer, but *one* body, *one* soul, *one* being. They're fighting for the planet again. They're stronger than anything, surely unstoppable. She smiles and he smiles with her. She laughs and he laughs with her.

It is too much for their bodies to bear. The monitors in the room flare up with red warning lights, and distantly he hears the sound of nurses and doctors rushing down the hall, and pounding open the door, and looking upon them with pity in their eyes.

How sad it is, they say, that such a young girl died here in the middle of the night, all alone.